

## Pornosophy: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Pornographic Image

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What happens when a philosopher gets a hard-on? Generally speaking, this is not a subject philosophers often discuss. Moreover, the slang, some might even say obscene expression ‘to get a hard-on’ does not properly belong to the idiom of academic research. In place of ‘hard-on’, or the only slightly less offensive ‘erection’, one should probably say something like ‘tumescence of the penis’, presuming for the moment that a hard-on must refer to a penis, which in turn must be part of a male body identifiable as such. Nothing could be less certain. In any case, the boldness and directness of the idiom of ‘getting a hard-on’ should probably be avoided, since its place is rather in pornography or maybe the bedroom. And yet, in apparently complying with such a powerful taboo, one must be able to ask if an opportunity is thereby lost. ‘Male’ philosophers such as Georges Bataille, the Marquis de Sade, Friedrich Schlegel and, closer to our time, feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have not only reflected on sexuality, they have sought to bear witness to ways in which sexual arousal and desire touch their philosophical thoughts and writing. For this mode of sexualised reflection, Avital Ronell has proposed the term ‘ pornosophy ’. She introduces it as follows:

Closer to the mores of contemporary writers, Friedrich Schlegel to this day takes beatings from philosophical overlords who continue to press charges against the philosophical pornography machine, the  *pornosophy* , his novel  *Lucinde*  indulges. As Paul de Man once drove home, the scandal of Schlegel consists in the crossover of genres, the wonton staging of incompatible codes, and the ensuing contaminations of reciprocally alien formalities, rather than in the build up of any specific or accreditable content. These writers, including, of course, the formidable Marquis de Sade, have tried to take philosophy to bed.<sup>1</sup>

Has anyone in modern philosophy ever attempted to elaborate an ethics or politics of the hard-on? Enduring debates about what is called the gender gap in philosophy departments throughout the world,<sup>2</sup> sexual harassment,<sup>3</sup> not to mention the endless vexations and jokes about the virile comportment of philosophers, and philosophy itself, that have been circulating in the backrooms of the discipline since I don't know when – all of this would support an argument that such an ethics or politics merits at least to be considered. In *The Post-Card* Jacques Derrida was not afraid to see that behind Socrates' back, under his right leg, Plato had 'an interminable disproportionate erection'.<sup>4</sup> This image, which Derrida claimed to have discovered one day on a post-card in the gift shop of the Bodleian library in Oxford, is from a drawing by Matthew Paris (1217–59), which appeared in a thirteenth century manuscript containing a series of fortunetelling tracts. Derrida went on to announce that 'this couple . . . these old nuts (*ces vieux fous*), these rascals on horse back (*galopins à cheval*) . . . this is us, in any event *a priori*, (they arrive upon us) (*c'est nous de toute façon, a priori, (ils arrivent sur nous)*'.<sup>5</sup> In all probability Gilles Deleuze was on a similar wavelength when in a published letter he spoke memorably about conceiving the history of philosophy 'as a kind of ass-fuck (*enculage*), or, what amounts to the same thing, an immaculate conception'.<sup>6</sup> Taking from behind the older philosophers who apparently came before him, Deleuze imagined himself in a virile position that replicates that of Plato in *The Post-Card*. The image of intergenerational and, one must confess, white male coupling, or to use a subcultural term, barebacking,<sup>7</sup> is from the point of view of Western philosophy scarcely one image among others. Both Derrida and Deleuze seem to agree; it belongs almost intrinsically to philosophy's procedures of transmission, be they conscious or unconscious. Could one dream of or imagine different procedures of philosophical transmission?<sup>8</sup> How might one begin to think the hard-on's finitude?

### Naked erection: 'A spurt of paint in our eye'

Finitude, it goes without saying, is one of the major motifs of the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, who inherited it in a certain way from Martin Heidegger. 'We are infinitely finite', Nancy writes, 'infinitely exposed to our existence as a nonessence, infinitely exposed to the otherness of our own being.'<sup>9</sup> Although he never,

to my knowledge, posed the question of finitude in terms of the hard-on, Nancy is one of the few philosophers to take the erect penis into consideration. He has also written on ‘The Birth of the Breasts’, as well as the *baiser* (which in French means both kissing and fucking) in a book called ‘The “There is” of the Sexual Relation’ (*L’Il y a du Rapport Sexuel*).<sup>10</sup> Further, he has written of the opening of the *baiser* onto ‘the bite and the taste of blood’ and ‘the unbearable tearing apart of orgasm’ in a remarkable reading of a film by Claire Denis called *Trouble Every Day*.<sup>11</sup> For reasons that will become clearer below, I’m not sure, however, if he would ever accept that his thought be described as ‘pornosophy’. I would even go so far as to suggest that it is possible to read in Nancy’s writings a certain aversion to porn, linked, as is so often the case, to a denigration and stigmatisation of sex work.

Nancy’s discussion of the erect penis can be found in the context of a study of the nude in Western painting and photography, which bears the elegantly inventive title *Nus Sommes [La Peau des Images]* (2006). The English translation of the title, *Being Nude [The Skin of Images]*, sadly loses the sense of nudity as an existential mode of our exposure to one another, our being-with: another Heideggerian motif that Nancy has emphasised and in many ways, dare I say, expanded.<sup>12</sup> The study of the nude is undertaken as part of a collective writing project with Federico Ferrari, who was one of Nancy’s students.

Now surprisingly, Nancy and Ferrari insist on maintaining a clear distinction between the nude and pornography, even while they are compelled to acknowledge that in the nude there is always some vacillation between the two:

[T]he nude is never only shown; it also shows its monstration. There is no stripped nude that isn’t stripping (stripping itself: and being stripped by whoever sees it). In this sense, there’s always an imperceptible vacillation between the nude and porno. Not that the difference isn’t clear: but it trembles, and this is perhaps also the trembling of modesty.<sup>13</sup>

Modesty for Nancy and Ferrari is a decisive value; it allows the imperceptible vacillation between nude and porn to be held in check. For once an erect penis enters on the scene, the nude they claim goes beyond nudity and becomes unambiguously pornographic, because all reserve of modesty has been lost:

Of all human nudity – and there’s no other kind of nudity – the penis is the only part that reveals more than, or something other than, nudity . . . Nudity here lacks any reserve of modesty. The skin is not the luminous transparency of the body; it is only an organ and an additional limb. In truth, the body is left behind. We are before another presence, singular, independent – hanging out. Either the penis falls, almost shapeless and crumpled, an awkward pendulum, or it’s erect, swollen, huge, powerfully in action, with meaning and presence only in ejaculation. [T]he erect penis can’t be painted (or photographed) without being pornographic, that is to say, without revealing a *methexis* without a *mimesis*, a contact, a contagion that dissolves the representation. The penis is the joker of the naked – but an uncompromising joker (*Joker*), forever too improper really to be put into play (*à jamais impropre à entrer véritablement dans le jeu*).<sup>14</sup>

What exactly is so threatening about the sight of a penis, especially an erect one? From where comes the necessity to put the penis into a separate archive called pornography and thereby immunise the archives of Western art and philosophy? As counter examples to Nancy and Ferrari’s argument, one could, of course, name the work of artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, who do not seek to conceal the penis in their nudes. Moreover, anyone who has ever set foot into a Tantra, Taoist sexuality or kink/BDSM<sup>15</sup> workshop might also query Nancy and Ferrari’s reading of the erect penis as having ‘meaning and presence only in ejaculation’. But this will not help to read what for them – and perhaps also for a dominant tradition of Western art and philosophy – appears to be singularly threatening.

Nancy is willing to acknowledge that, without exception, all images have an erotic component that is proper to them, due to the *methexis*, the force of desire and participation, which envelops and propels the aesthetic form. ‘Each *eidos*’, he writes, ‘is an *eros*: each form marries a force that moves it.’<sup>16</sup> In the same essay, ‘The Image: Mimesis and Methexis’, Nancy adds: ‘No *mimesis* occurs without *methexis* – or else be merely copy, reproduction – that is the principle. Reciprocally, no doubt, no *methexis* without implicating *mimesis*, that is to say precisely production (not reproduction) in a form of the force communicated in participation.’<sup>17</sup> Like an unmarried bachelor, the single erect penis, however, would no longer be erotic, but a force without modesty or reserve – a contagion so powerful that it dissolves the apparent stability of the aesthetic form and can therefore no longer be taken seriously. As

pornography, it would be masquerading as the thing itself of sex, which cannot be represented:

But the penis offers to us a blind and obscene orbit, a sort of *comic* menace . . . a spurt of paint in our eye, which is nothing but Polyphemus's furious spasm and the painting of desire, which cannot be represented.<sup>18</sup> The sun, death, and sex: we cannot look straight at them because they do not have a face. They are each an access to the absolute, the infinite, real impossibility, and the intimate obscurity of the image.<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to porn, the writing strategy goes beyond, as Adrienne Janus suggests in the introduction to this volume, 'rubbing up against a little wet paint' to reach a blinding limit.<sup>20</sup> The comic image of a penis spurting paint into the eye of the viewer should not conceal the political implications of Nancy and Ferrari's argument, which are quite serious. Unlike the nude and by extension Western art, pornography is negatively characterised as being on the side of prostitution, removal of freedom and abuse. This becomes explicit in their reading of a photograph by Julien Daniel, entitled 'Peep Show':

According to its etymology, pornography is a piece of writing, a document, story, or description concerning prostitution. The Woman who is prostituted, *porné* (or the prostituted man,  *pornos*), is transported to be sold. The verb *pernumi* belonged to the language of exportation, especially the export of slaves. Porn is first of all displacement, transfer: exile, expropriation, deportation [. . .] The skin of the nude imposes itself on the gaze, touching and penetrating it, denuding the gaze in its turn, while, in pornography, the skin provokes the eye to function *as a mechanical viewer* (emphasis mine) a prism that disperses the spectrum of getting off. One is the nude of truth, of its infinite coming into presence, and the other is the nude of definite and definitive access to truth, showing all its faces at once. [. . .] ['Peep Show'] is caught in the trap of representing the unrepresentable. That's why it's poor. It braves this poverty, as the reverse side of nudity, the other face of the spasm, sublime and miserable . . . [Porn] tries to use and wear out what can't be used or worn out . . . [It] is worn out from the start, worn out in advance as a fantasy of use (which must therefore also be about abuse: exportation, exhibition and the extortion of excitation, putting the trance up for sale . . .).<sup>21</sup>

Despite the philosophical terminology, this characterisation participates in a very old and conservative stereotype of sex work, which, whenever it is rehearsed in the media or by lawmakers, works to stigmatise and denigrate the bodies of those of who do sex work, who – dare I say – have always been mostly women and/or members of sexual, gender and/or racial minorities. It is surprising and disappointing that a philosopher of Nancy's stature would have countersigned it. It is quite unjust to accuse pornography of provoking the eye to function as a mechanical viewer. Mechanical functioning is not restricted to viewing pornography, but is a consequence of a structure at work at the very origin of all viewing, reading and marking practices, including those of art and philosophy. I am referring to the structure of repeatability or 'iterability' in excess of presence, whose far-reaching consequences Derrida analysed, for example, in 'Signature Event Context'.<sup>22</sup> Mechanical functioning does not arrive in a second moment to corrode an originally free, spontaneous or self-present intentional gaze. It is only with the help of mechanical repeatability that the eye (or any other organ for that matter, including the penis) can function at all.<sup>23</sup> And if so, it is not legitimate to oppose the nude and pornography on two sides of an indivisible line, where one would be proper and the other improper: the nude as singularly human, modest, unusable, uneconomical, 'infinite coming to presence'; and porn as mechanically corrosive, immodest, abusive, tainted by commerce, the masquerade of 'definitive access to truth, showing all faces at once'.

What would be *un regard juste* with regard to pornography and the hard-on? How might art and philosophy give greater hospitality to that which apparently threatens to undermine its authority? These questions have, I would argue, some urgency, since today pornography is produced and disseminated more readily than ever before. As porn scholar, Tim Dean, has pointed out: 'Now anyone with a phone and Internet access may become a pornographer . . . what distinguishes the new image technologies from their predecessors is the ease of reproducibility, which lends every mobile-phone photo unprecedented potential for viral circulation.'<sup>24</sup> He adds: 'obscenity always threatens to undermine authority (whether of an individual or an institution)'.<sup>25</sup> He gives the example of a New York congressman, Anthony Weiner, whose inadvertent circulation, via Twitter, of a picture of his penis shattered his hitherto successful political career. On the basis of Dean's

inference, I would risk the following hypothesis: neither art nor philosophy can welcome what is called pornography into their archives without losing some of their authority or, at the very least, having their authority put into question.

But why is authority, especially institutional, dare I say, phallic authority, so allergic to porn? In all probability this allergy will never completely go away, despite the increasing difficulty of segregating pornography from public view. Perhaps one answer is because a hard-on is unjustifiable; it cannot be accounted for or defended in the public realm. It is in default with regard to 'ethics', if ethics implies the capacity to render an account, an explanation, give sufficient reason for what is and/or happens: the *Principium reddendae rationis*. That the 'sexual relation' happens *a priori* in excess of the Leibnizian principle of reason ('*nihil est sine ratione*') is also what Nancy suggests, when reading Lacan's famous provocation '*Il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*':

There is no report, no account to be given, no result or product or accomplishment – *achievement* in English – of the sexual relation, and it is precisely according to this measure that there is, indeed, 'sexual relation'.<sup>26</sup>

If one were to write an ethics or politics of the hard-on, it would have to take into account this limit of ethics where there is no report, no account to be given, no result or product or accomplishment. Ronell makes the point more even starkly when, in the course of an interview with me, she asked about 'the purely unjustifiable in the practices and grammars of sexuality':

You can't justify, 'This is the way it is' or 'it's not', because you don't have a grasp of it [. . .] You could say, 'No, there's no positive value to this'. [But] that we're not allowed to do, we're not yet allowed to say, 'There's no legitimacy to what I want, this is just how I get off'. I can't tell you it's positive, as a matter of fact, I'm not sure it is.<sup>27</sup>

If it is impermissible, as I believe, simply to abandon responsibility and ethics with regard to the 'sexual relation', then the question becomes: How to give a report for that which 'there is no report, no account to be given'? Such could be the ethical or political task of pornography today, or, if you like, pornosophy. As a matter of urgency, such pornosophy could inquire into the links (if any)

between what Nancy, via Kant, identifies as the virility of the drive of reason and the ‘modesty’, which demands that a hard-on must always be taken out of serious consideration:

This is why the *Trieb* is also the thrust internal to reason that Kant designates as the movement of reason toward the ‘unconditioned’ (or the ‘undetermined’, *das Unbestimmte*). Kant is the first to attempt to give this drive its due, namely, a due exceeding the order of the ‘understanding’ and knowledge of an object, a due that is regulated by nothing other than an opening to the infinite.<sup>28</sup>

‘Being’, understood as a verb, *to be*, means ‘to thrust or push’ (or ‘to impel’, ‘to throw’, and even ‘to shake’, ‘to excite’). Being, to be, is drive [*pulsion*] and beating [*pulsation*] of the being in general. The drive of reason is its desire for the thing itself.<sup>29</sup>

Earlier in the same chapter of *Adoration: Deconstruction of Christianity II*, entitled ‘Mysteries and Virtues’, Nancy writes:

The word virtue bears within it, not only in its Latin etymology – *virtus*, virile quality [. . .] We must say that virtue is above all *drive*.<sup>30</sup>

In a footnote accompanying the phrase ‘virile quality’, Nancy adds:

Let the issue of machismo not be raised here. With or without Freud, *we know* that virility is no more the reserve of boys than tenderness is that of girls.<sup>31</sup>

Through the detour of Latin etymology, Nancy conjures the virility of the drive of reason, while at the same time raising ‘the issue of machismo’ in a footnote. Intriguingly, Nancy raises ‘the issue of machismo’ by dismissing it. The apparent effect of his reading is that the value of virility is justified. Virility would belong intrinsically to reason – to philosophy itself, one might go so far as to suggest – as an essential characteristic of the drive from which it comes. And yet, there remains a question, or at least, the phantom of a question, which is implied in the rhetoric of ‘Let the issue of machismo not be raised here.’ This is presumably a feminine or feminist question concerning the drive’s male specificity, or more precisely, its macho excess. Significantly, when it comes to the

word 'virility', Nancy does not rely, as he so often does, on etymology. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, virility, like the French *virile*, is derived from the Latin *vir* meaning man, hero.

I agree, of course, with Nancy's claim that virility (like machismo) is no more the specific reserve of 'boys' any more than tenderness is that of 'girls'. It is not dependent on the supposed biological possession of a penis. But all the same I wonder about his appeal to self-evidence: 'we know'. Who exactly 'with or without Freud' is the 'we' who 'knows'? Somewhat ironically, Nancy employs this rather macho rhetorical style to justify (not) raising 'the issue of machismo' in relation to the value of virility: not only that of the drive of reason, but that of the drive as such. For Nancy, the drive, while virile, would still be modest; it would not be tainted by machismo. For Nancy, and indeed not only for him, it is that macho excess, the manly cockiness or pride, which is not virtuous and generally speaking out of the question. The issue should not even be raised. Rather it must be denied, disavowed or hidden, like pornography, or as pornography: a place where you put what you really do (not) want to look at. The question remains, however, if there isn't always some machismo at stake in the virile drive, especially, in the philosopher's drive, which in size is the biggest one of all, according to Derrida, who speaks of the place of the philosopher's desire and ambition as that of a 'modesty haunted by the devil'.

Derrida's virility or modesty, which he avows to be haunted by the devil, is inseparable from an experience of impotence. With regard to both the impotence and the machismo of the philosophical drive, I consider Derrida to be much more honest than Nancy, who does not seem to want to know about either. Later, with the concepts of the im-possible and the aporia, Derrida will place the experience of impotence at the very heart of his thought. That is to say, as the *sine qua non* of invention, forgiveness, hospitality, reading, and so on.<sup>32</sup> This impotence would include notably the incapacity to imagine the figure of the philosopher as anything other than masculine. While the purpose of Nancy's 'we know' is to shut down a phantom debate about machismo, it could also encourage one to inquire into the complexity and subtlety of sex/gender dynamics with regard to virility as an often disavowed, but key Western philosophical value.<sup>33</sup> Inasmuch as the drive of reason can be said to be in excess of the Leibnizian principle of reason, virility would belong, in Nancy's terms, to the same

domain as that of the ‘sexual relation’, for which ‘there is no report, no account to be given’.

Inasmuch as pornography, on the other hand, has the audacity to report, to archive, and moreover, to make of sex a marketable product, it is within Nancy’s terms without justification. It is an improper contagion of the ‘sexual relation’ for which properly there is ‘no report, no account to be given’. For Nancy and Ferrari, sex – or rather, love – should not be pornographic: ‘the pleasure of love is devoid of fantasy: it’s your body and mine now; this is not a scene’.<sup>34</sup> In a rather austere and Christian way, Nancy opposes love and pornography. In a later text on sexual exclamations, written to be included in the French *Dictionary of Pornography*, he reiterates:

If pornography consists in remaining attached to the fantasy of exhibition (and to the exclamation as overexhibition), love (or whatever we want to call it), by contrast, leaves fantasy behind and withdraws from the cry into murmur and silence.<sup>35</sup>

But why do love and pornography have to be opposed, as if they could only be enemies of one another? Why can’t pornography also be a space of ‘love’ and ‘thought’: an archive or event where one bears witness to the fantasy of exhibition and to the murmur and the silence? As if to pre-empt such questions, Nancy goes so far as to interpret sexual exclamations, among which he includes, (depending on the tone), ‘I love you’, as ‘in themselves already in lived reality an inchoate form of pornography’.<sup>36</sup> They ‘double vision on the plane of language’. Noting the abundance of such exclamations in literature, he adds that ‘this inchoate form of pornography’ may also be considered ‘a sort of poetry *in nuce*’.<sup>37</sup>

### Feminist porn and the deconstruction of Christianity

If pornography and poetry are commensurate with one another at least *in nuce*, this opens a perspective onto how Nancy’s thinking of the image might communicate with the work of those today that seek to reimagine the art of erotic film-making. In particular, I’m thinking of the contemporary movement of ‘feminist pornography’, interest in which has grown considerably over the last decade, as indeed has the scholarly interest in porn more generally within the Anglophone world.<sup>38</sup> In his essay on the cinema of

Abbas Kiarostami entitled 'The Evidence of Film' (2001), Nancy links cinematic image-making with the motifs of justice, education and respect. If an image, he argues, is made with care, with regard for what is looked at, then the real will also be cared for.<sup>39</sup> It is worth recalling that, for Nancy, the real is not the attribute of a thing (*res*) understood as a realised presence, but corresponds to its non-realised 'coming to presence', which is in excess of any representation, vision or world view. A rightful and just look (*regard juste*) is 'respectful of the real it beholds'. Looking 'amounts to thinking the real, putting oneself to the test of a meaning (*sens*) one cannot master'.<sup>40</sup>

In this concluding section, I would like to bring Nancy's argument into communication with the work of Sensate Films: a feminist erotic media company. The 'slow porn' of Sensate Films articulates an ethics of slowing down the production of erotic images and the experience of their creation 'to pay greater attention to what in mainstream pornography is often missed: the quality of a breath, for example, or the words in a whisper'.<sup>41</sup> It is porn that also makes a claim to being art. Unlike the films of Abbas Kiarostami and other art film directors, it is not a cinema of the '*auteur*', which almost irresistibly would be interpreted as the origin or 'subject' of the look (*le regard*). Sensate's two producers, Aven Frey and Gala Vanting, acknowledge the people who appear in their work not only as actors, but as co-creators, who give input and even direction on the creation of the images in which they appear. This albeit marginal yet important work would seek not only to create new addressees of pornography, but to stir and shake up the erotic gaze itself, to make it more inclusive, creative, more accurate and just.

We believe that . . . erotic media have great potential to reflect and question our values, to educate us, to speak truths personal and political, and to expand our capacity for emotion – including but absolutely not limited to desire.<sup>42</sup>

The larger feminist pornography movement to which Sensate Films belongs is part of an so-called 'third-wave' feminism, which arose in opposition to the 'second-wave' anti-pornography feminism, with which it has an ongoing debate. Led by figures such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, this 'second wave' reached its zenith during the 1970s and early 1980s; it saw in

pornography a key agent of female oppression. It should be noted, however, that even during this period many feminists recognised the great importance of giving attention to women's sexuality as a key site of resistance to the phallogentrism of Western thought. This is especially true, for example, of the work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous.<sup>43</sup> In line with the recognition that today production and access to pornography is unprecedented, this new younger generation of professed 'sex positive' feminists (many of whom also publicly identify as sex workers) seek to provide alternatives to mainstream porn, but in so doing also question what porn is and does, as well as the social, political and economic restraints imposed on it. Within this incredibly diverse genre, I'd like to focus on two short films by Sensate, which portray the submission of a woman to one or several men. The first, *Taken*, is the narrative of an abduction fantasy, both written and performed by a young woman, Viva, in which she plays the central role of the one abducted. The other, *Amber*, is the documentation of a pre-negotiated BDSM/edgeplay<sup>44</sup> scene between a young woman and a considerably older man, which includes impact play, knife play, strangling and breath-play.

I choose these two films in part because they explore 'the purely unjustifiable' from a certain feminist point of view. They attempt to account for the possibility of being deeply turned on by submission to male authority, which is portrayed as being self-serving, macho, violent, as well as physically and psychologically sadistic. What could make these two films feminist? There is the consensual aspect, certainly, which is strongly emphasised; but there is also the dimension of agency and empowerment. *Taken* is Viva's own fantasy, in which she dictates everything that happens. The film does not show a woman being abducted by a man, but a woman who has a fantasy of abduction. You see only her face. The man to whom the fantasy is addressed never appears. The film shows and tells us something of who the woman is who has this fantasy: her face, her age, her accent, the tattoo on her left shoulder, the sound of her voice when she is truly excited, her narrative and poetic pornography:

Take, took, taken, you took, but I gave, didn't I, I gave way [. . .] I never know where you are taking me and how long or what you'll do with me, whether I'll have release or frustration, whether we'll be together or whether you'll give me to others, whether I'll be humili-

ated, cherished or hurt or pleased, but this beginning, my abduction never changes, and before the ritual of taking is complete, you have to ask me, you always ask me, your voice harsh, loud in my ear, do you want this, and my answer as always is yes.<sup>45</sup>

As the supposed ‘author’ of the piece, Viva appears in the film also as one who lives on after the fantasy to which she bears witness. This ‘breaking of the fourth wall’ is a common device of feminist porn, which often uses performers who already have an off-screen sexual relationship and often also includes interviews with them before or after the scene to give the viewer a context for the work to be read.

In *Amber*, the question of empowerment and agency is more complex. It is a very emotional piece, where one of the two protagonists, Gala Vanting, weeps while she is being flogged, her hands tied to two poles, naked. Following the film in the attached interview, she comments:

A big part of this film is footage of me crying. From a very surface user perspective, I’m in pain or I’m experiencing something negative. And so for someone who is totally unseasoned to this type of play or these types of ecstatic experiences, this looks not good, unsettling, whatever. They identify with the female character who is crying. They think: bad. For me, that’s just as much of a release as an orgasm or as a scream. It’s about taking that full spectrum of experience and concentrating it into an expression of some kind so that it can leave my body. Throughout the whole film, you see things coming into my body, you see impact, or energy or your will or whatever and I find it beautiful and delicious that it welds in this way, and that it releases in this way.<sup>46</sup>

The title of the film, *Amber*, refers to a word in the couple’s safe wording system. By saying this word (among others, which remain unspoken) Gala, who is in the submissive role, can exert a minimum a level of agency in a situation where her possibilities for agency are starkly reduced. By saying this word, which she does twice, she is able at least to pause the relentless flogging, take stock and weep. On her use of the word ‘amber’ Gala comments to her partner, Frank Ly, the film’s other protagonist:

Another key point you touched on was your confidence that I can take care of myself . . . every time I say ‘amber’, I just look so smug, like



Figure 6.1 *Amber* is a film about the push-pull of erotic edgeplay and the curious brutality of love. Directed and performed by Gala Vanting and Frank Ly.  
© sensate films 2012.

I've done my thing, and I've taken care of myself, that creates this real solidity for me which then dissolves and drops out into further experience of that state of transcendence, or ecstasy, or whatever you want to call it.<sup>47</sup>

Gala speaks about that which would seem to give her a last vestige of agency also with a certain ironic detachment: 'I just look so smug.' On the one hand, she admits that saying 'amber' creates 'a real solidity for her', but, on the other hand, this solidity dissolves, as if for her it were ultimately a question of giving up entirely, letting go, sinking further and deeper into 'whatever you want to call it'. At that moment, could you say that the film is still feminist? It is for me to judge, but it is clear that the film still seeks to be, in Nancy's terms, a rightful and just look (*un regard juste*) with regard to the real. This is especially so because of the care taken to place what the viewer sees into a context, which it turns out, is a Christian one (even if atheist). Significantly, Gala's partner, Frank Ly, who during the film is apparently in the dominant role, administering the pain, controlling the action, admits: 'the relationship I had with you is exemplified in the act of yielding *both of us* to that relationship, not knowing actually what it is'

(emphasis mine). On the topic of BDSM more generally, Frank Ly adds:

The use of pain in human existence has been there for thousands of years . . . [and] the use of pain in a conscious ritualistic way [. . .] is not new. I find it fascinating that the moral inquisition of BDSM as something that is right or wrong comes from a Judaic-Christian thought about what is morally right, how we should be treating each other as human beings. And yet, we know very well that Christianity, the Christian history of the church is masochistic and sadistic, both at once. I'm not judging that. I'm just bringing attention to it and inherently I think within the human experience there is a need and a desire to push those edges. And it is exemplified over and over again. If you give it a context, an intelligent context of service to each other, then it is far from harmful. Whereas if it is not given that, it will seek expression and it will be harmful. It's something that's happening in the cloisters, literally.<sup>48</sup>

In this passage, Frank attempts to provide an argument for 'an intelligent context of service to each other', which would make what would otherwise be harmful 'far from harmful' – the need and desire, which would be intrinsic to the human experience, 'to push those edges'. As a BDSM practitioner myself, I am strongly tempted to agree. The philosopher in me, however, (who I am not sure is masculine) feels compelled to question the self-certainty with which he proposes a thesis about the nature of 'the human experience' and especially, the reassurance that his argument would offer that when practiced under certain conditions 'pushing those edges' will be 'far from harmful'. How can you be so sure? This assurance seems to me irreconcilable with what Frank admits earlier – that neither he nor Gala know exactly what their relationship is. Intrinsic to the yielding to 'the relationship' in which their relationship 'is exemplified' is *not knowing*. This 'not knowing' can be read in Bataille's sense as non-knowledge (*non-savoir*). In the film, Gala enthusiastically agrees with this point. In fact, when Frank says it, it seems to turn her on. If one takes their admission seriously – that neither the one nor the other knows what 'the relationship' is and/or what happens between them, then one cannot be assured that what they are doing is 'far from harmful'. Ronell makes a similar point in response to another BDSM practitioner:

Your subject is still choosing violation and containing it, and still saying it's positive, it's healthy, but what if you didn't know what the fuck it was? Nor whether it is really pleasurable or unpleasurable? But all that is suspended in a very risky, dangerous way that, however, is part of something like destructive *jouissance* or the 'essence' let's say provisionally of desire, which is to say maybe the utterance 'hurt me' for some. But if you then have to round it up and say, 'don't worry folks', this is actually positive, then I think you've been coerced.<sup>49</sup>

The reference to Judaic-Christian thought, and especially to the bloody history of the Catholic Church and the Inquisition, is essential to Frank Ly's argument. By pointing to the church's hypocrisy, he believes he can at least question what the Judaic-Christian heritage says about 'what is morally right, how we should be treating one another'. How far can this questioning go? What Nancy calls – following Derrida and Heidegger – the (self-)deconstruction of Christianity, is not a dismissal of the moral injunctions and laws of the Judaic-Christian heritage on the basis of what we believe 'we know' of its history. One could say almost the contrary. This (self-)deconstruction will have 'opened up a space to let us see something which was always present in [Christianity] but unseen and unseeable until now'.<sup>50</sup> Among those things that perhaps remain from Christianity, Nancy includes faith, as distinguished from religious assurance, and 'the famous Christian love'.<sup>51</sup> This love, which Nancy recognises as impossible, 'the top of absurdity', is the injunction to love everybody, even your worst enemy.

I believe it is possible to read in *Amber* and in the work of feminist pornography more generally an inheritance of what Nancy calls 'the (self-)deconstruction of Christianity'. In all likelihood without being aware of it, feminist pornography seeks to be faithful, pornographically faithful,<sup>52</sup> to this famous Christian love, for example, through its ethics of inclusivity, harm reduction, equality, human dignity, 'safer sex', its rigorous rejection of rigid definitions of sex and gender roles, and so on. Yet, the unjustifiable remains unjustifiable, without which, (dare I say) porn would not be porn and sex would not be sex. From the yielding to not-knowing, porn, sex and, (dare I say), 'love' hold their enduring interest and draw. What would happen to academic philosophy if it were not so threatened by this?

## Notes

1. Avital Ronell, 'Introduction: The Stealth Pulse of Philosophy', in *Blind Date: Sex and Philosophy*, by Anne Dufourmantelle, trans. Catherine Porter (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), xvi. See also Paul de Man, 'The Concept of Irony', in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 168–9.
2. Molly Paxton, Carrie Figdor and Valerie Tiberius, 'Quantifying the Gender Gap: An Empirical Study of the Underrepresentation of Women in Philosophy', *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (2012): 949–57.
3. Jennifer Saul, 'Philosophy has a sexual harassment problem: Recent allegations against Colin McGinn are just the tip of the discipline's iceberg', *Salon.com*, Thursday, August 15, 2013, accessed 30 July 2015, [http://www.salon.com/2013/08/15/philosophy\\_has\\_a\\_sexual\\_harassment\\_problem](http://www.salon.com/2013/08/15/philosophy_has_a_sexual_harassment_problem).
4. Jacques Derrida, *The Post-Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 18.
5. This is a slightly modified translation. For Kant, the term a priori indicates from first premises, independent of experience. By employing this term, Derrida suggests that we do not simply have a choice about the arrival of this couple on horseback upon us. It happens whether we are aware of it or not, whether we like it or not. But hasn't Derrida also taught us to ask: who is 'us'? Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1972).
6. Gilles Deleuze, 'Lettre à un critique sévère', In *Pourparlers 1972–1990* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1990), 15.
7. Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
8. Derrida, *The Post-Card*, 18, 48.
9. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 155.
10. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality*, trans. Anne O'Byrne (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).
11. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Icon of Fury: Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day*', *Film-Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (2008a), 1–2, accessed 30 July 2015, <http://www.film-philosophy.com/2008v12n1/nancy.pdf>.
12. Compare this with: Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

13. Jean-Luc Nancy and Federico Ferrari, *Being Nude: The Skin of Images*, trans. Anne O'Byrne and Carlie Anglemlire (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 98.
14. Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 51–2.
15. BDSM is the abbreviation for: Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism.
16. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'The Image: Mimesis and Methexis', in this volume.
17. Ibid.
18. Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 53.
19. Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 71.
20. Adrienne Janus, 'Introduction', in this volume. Nancy, *Birth to Presence*, 351.
21. Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 97–9.
22. Derrida, *Margins*, 309–30.
23. Is this not what Nancy also says in *L'intrus*? 'I have – Who? – this "I" is precisely the question, the old question: what is this enunciating subject? Always foreign to the subject of its own utterance; necessarily intruding upon it, yet ineluctably its motor, shifter, or heart – I, therefore, received the heart of another, now nearly ten years ago . . . "I" always finds itself caught in the battlements and gaps of technical possibilities.' Jean-Luc Nancy, 'L'intrus', trans. Susan Hanson, *The New Centennial Review* 2, no. 3 (2002): 1–3.
24. Tim Dean, 'Introduction: Pornography, Technology, Archive', in *Porn Archives*, ed. Tim Dean et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 6.
25. Dean, 'Introduction', 5.
26. Nancy, *Corpus II*, 98.
27. Peter Banki, 'Sex/Philosophy: Interview with Avital Ronell', Interview at the *Sex/Philosophy Symposium*, University of Western Sydney, Sydney, April 2013, accessed 8 August 2015, <https://vimeo.com/65452472>.
28. Jean-Luc, Nancy, *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 48.
29. Nancy, *Adoration*, 49.
30. Nancy, *Adoration*, 47–8.
31. Nancy, *Adoration*, 110. Emphasis mine.
32. See, for example: Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001). Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*,

- Volume 1*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
33. In *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, Derrida speaks of his embarrassment concerning the privilege of ‘virility’ (Derrida’s scare quotes) implied in Nancy’s use of the terms ‘generosity’ and ‘fraternity in abandonment’, which play an important role in the concluding argument of Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. Bridget McDonald (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 22–3. In a footnote of *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy acknowledges Derrida’s critique and adds: ‘I have reversed my position again and again on the possibility of looking into whether fraternity is necessarily generic or congenital . . .’ Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 198ns28.
  34. Nancy and Ferrari, *Being Nude*, 99.
  35. Nancy, *Corpus II*, 106.
  36. Nancy, *Corpus II*, 105.
  37. Nancy, *Corpus II*, 105.
  38. Not only have there been a number of recent studies and scholarly anthologies – Dean, ‘Introduction’ and Tristan Taormino et al., *The Feminist Porn Book: the Politics of Producing Pleasure* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013) – but also the establishment in 2014 of an internationally peer reviewed journal, *Porn Studies*, published by Taylor and Francis.
  39. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Evidence of Film, Abbas Kiarostami* (Brussels: Yves Gevaert, 2001), 18.
  40. Nancy, *Evidence of Film*, 38. Translation modified. It can be argued that Nancy’s realism is irreducible to any conventional theory of realism, logic of mimesis or faith in indexicality. Derrida, *On Touching*, 46. See also: Laura McMahan, ‘Post-deconstructive realism? Nancy’s cinema of contact’, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8, no. 1 (2010): 73–93.
  41. Aven Frey and Gala Vanting, Sensate Films, <http://www.sensate-films.com>, accessed 11 August 2015.
  42. Frey and Vanting.
  43. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the other woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985). Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93.
  44. Play on the edge of safety or sanity.

45. Aven Frey and Gala Vanting. *Taken*. Film. Directed by Aven Frey and Gala Vanting. 2013. Sensate Films, 2013.
46. Aven Frey and Gala Vanting. *Amber*. Film. Directed by Aven Frey and Gala Vanting. 2013. Sensate Films, 2013.
47. Frey and Vanting, *Amber*.
48. Frey and Vanting, *Amber*.
49. Banki, 'Sex/Philosophy.'
50. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo et al. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 36. Jean-Luc Nancy et al., 'Love and Community: a round-table discussion with Jean-luc Nancy, Avital Ronell and Wolfgang Schirmacher', Seminar at The European Graduate School, August 2001.
51. Nancy et al., 'Love and Community.'
52. This essay is in dialogue with John Paul Ricco's re-reading of certain motifs of Nancy's thought, notably in John Paul Ricco, *The Decision Between Us: Art and Ethics in the Time of Scenes* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014) and in the recently published 'Pornographic Faith: The Two Sources of Naked Sense at the Limits of Belief and Humiliation', lecture at Reed College, Portland, Oregon, 25 March 2014.